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Wiley, Martha

52

Chinese Womanhood of Today

Miss Martha E. Wiley

中國現世女史



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All the world is familiar with the political conditions that brought about the present revolution, but few stop to think that these conditions are not to be changed merely by a successful revolution. The basal principles of character are of too deep a nature to be changed by the adoption of a few new and extraneous customs. Nothing less than the vitalizing power of Christ can make China what she ought to be. Nowhere is the need of a higher standard more evident than in the **attitude toward women, and in woman's attitude toward life.**

No sweeping change in politics, government, or theories of education bears the same importance to China as does this great problem. Once after a missionary address in America an interested listener remarked: "What is the use of further talk about the needs of Chinese women? They have their feet unbound now and they can walk about and find out things for themselves."

True, the Chinese women who have come within the sphere of Christian influence are beginning to desire to "walk around and find out things for themselves," and it is our obligation as Christian women to see that they not only find out the things that are pure and lovely but that they follow after these things. Let us not be deluded by the idea that "New China" has set right the abuses. The merest beginnings have been made. The struggle has begun but

it is against the powers of darkness that have been in control these many years and are still entrenched in the heart of each one.

What, it is asked, darkens the life of a Chinese woman that is not common to women of every land?

Let us go to the beginning of a Chinese woman's life and live with her some of the problems. When her first baby wail is heard there is mingled with it the disappointed protests of relatives, and even of the parents responsible for her existence. Why could not a **boy** have been their good fortune? If the family is fairly comfortable the little one may be spared to "eat rice;" if not her baby cry is heard no more in the house.

Stone land-marks sometimes have on them the inscription: "Drowning of babies is forbidden," and numerous proclamations of officials condemn the practice but it is only a little less common than heretofore outside the ports and in communities untouched by Christianity. In the cities other methods of evading the responsibility of bringing up the child are used, one of which is to leave the child at the receiving station kept open by the authorities. If the infant survives she may be passed on to some one who wants a little slave girl, or she may be taken as the future wife of some infant whose people are too poor to provide a wife in any other way. During the years that she is growing up to an age where marriage is allowable she is practically the slave of the family.

Often children are left on the street for the police to pick up. A nun in the Roman Catholic orphanage in a suburb of Foochow told the writer that the babies sent to the orphanage yearly numbered from one to several thousand

but that their condition was such that most of them soon died. This is the condition in the capital city of the "best evangelized province in the empire!"

The country missionaries are well aware that the evil is as rampant as formerly. A lady for many years a missionary in Fukien says that in her district the people of the mountain villages unblushingly state that eight out of every ten girls born are made way with in some manner. Another missionary in charge of an orphanage recently said that during the "Year of the Tiger" the infant girls left at her door exceeded those left for some years previous.

There is a cycle of twelve years under which all children are born. Each year bears the name of an animal and before betrothal the cycle year of the girl must be ascertained. The animal must be one which can be controlled by the animal governing the year of the boy's birth. For example, if the girl's cycle year is the rat and the boy's the dog all will go merrily for the boy will be master, but if the girl is born in the Tiger Year who will be able to control her, for the tiger is the king of beasts! Hence the girls born in the Tiger Year will not be desirable as wives and will not be worth the bringing up. This is not ancient history, this is China at the present time.

But let the girl grow into a fat little mite with chubby arms and a smile for every one and she is fondled and petted until her little ladyship rules the house. If there happens to be no boy to monopolize the honors she grows into an uncontrolled and utterly undisciplined child. If she cries for anything that is reason sufficient why she should have it. Her fits of temper grow more and more frequent until she be-



WOMAN UNBINDING HER FOOT.

comes too unbearable and then a reckoning comes. The father or mother observes that she is "big enough to whip" and she gets all that has accrued to her during the past. A bamboo clothes pole, or a stool, or anything else handy will serve to whip the girl and give vent to the parent's wrath, for he had his temper trained in the same school.

Fortunately the screams that once rang through the rooms of most Chinese homes as the feet of little girls were being bound are becoming less and less in the ports and in places influenced by foreign agitation against the custom. But though this custom is doomed it is far from being ended. In foreign countries the supposition is that the missionaries have ended the struggle and that the Chinese are falling into line and that no more need be said on the tiresome subject.

During the past two months the writer has personally passed through hundreds of villages in many country districts from Fukien to Peking and among the throngs of women who swarmed about the strange foreign ladies at the inns none had unbound their feet. A missionary long resident in a difficult station of Shantung stated that she could count on her fingers all the non-Christian women who had unbound their feet. And strange to say in places where foreigners seldom go the remark is current: "Foreign women bind their waists and we only bind our feet." On this tour in three different hospitals were seen cases where amputation of the foot was necessary because of injuries received by too tightly binding the bones.

But cruel as this custom is, there is another bondage—that of heart and mind—that is even worse. Yards of bandages around broken feet

cannot compare with the fetters forged by evil customs and superstitions around her life during what should be the pure sweet years of budding womanhood. Her baby ears hear impure words and vile oaths, her eyes see licentiousness about her; her observation shows her that truth is disregarded if falsehood will serve better.

In Christian lands even the child of non-Christian parents is surrounded by an atmosphere of Christian standards; in China even the child of Christian parents is handicapped by the prevalence of heathen wickedness about him. A Japanese student of social conditions in America was asked his impressions and replied: "I have seen here evils blacker than in my own land but on the other hand I have felt a power for positive goodness and unselfish service that is impossible outside a land that is essentially Christian." This "power for positive goodness" is lacking and how woeful the lack is can be realized only by those who know the inner life of the people.

Will not modern education solve the problem? Christian education has been and yet is doing wonders to eradicate the evils learned in early life in the students under its influence, but how few these are compared to the great host that have no such advantages! Up to the present time the efforts of the government to deal with the problem have been practically futile.

In the city of Foochow the girls actually in the government schools are estimated at one-tenth—which is doubtless a very generous estimate—while nine-tenths of the great total are untaught. And this is not taking into consideration the country girls where the "blind cows" can work just as well in the fields without knowing characters. For the most part the instruc-

tion given in the public schools will not raise the ideal of womanhood.

A feeble effort is made to teach ethics. Stories of filial piety and loyalty to the government are the common subjects of the "Ethics." With capable teachers the instruction would be inadequate, without such the teaching is the merest sham. Many of the positions are filled by women who obtained a smattering of education in Japan. One woman in a prominent position made a reputation as an "Amazon" and bomb-thrower and her employment is in the nature of "to the victor belong the spoils."

No matter how good the equipment or how beautiful the grounds the government is not able to cope with this problem. Teachers of ability and character are the product of **Christian ethics** and **Christian example**. Hence it behooves all who love China to do their utmost to bring Christian education to China at least to such an extent as to provide teachers—Christian teachers—else how can these hundreds of thousands of girls be educated in any true sense of the word?

But what about the great majority of girls who do not have even these limited advantages? Their employment varies according to the financial conditions of the parents. If there is enough to eat they are content to sit about day after day and worry their heads with no useless cares.

In cities the girls often try to earn a little by needlework. One way to break the dead monotony is to bring in a "reader," a woman who can read books that are obscene. Another and more common way is to gamble. The extent to which women waste time in this way may possibly be understood by some of the women in



FACING THE FUTURE.

American churches. The fascination of the gaming-table was never known to flag.

The scolding that takes place among the women is also a marvel as to the time consumed. Sometimes a half-day is devoted to the stormy discussion as to the rightful owner of a needle or some other equally important subject. The dearth of matter for interesting conversation can well be understood when we consider what our own conversation would be if we had few or no books to read. When we think of the stagnation of the city girl's life the village girl's condition, even though she works to the limit of her strength, is preferable.

But no matter what the condition of the parents very early in the girl's life they are casting about to find a husband who can pay back all the money invested in the girl's food, unless, as is common, the girl has been betrothed in infancy. Just this month when interference was made with a father for exorbitant charges for his daughter he angrily exclaimed: "If I had fed a pig until she was big and fat I'd get more money than this!" The bickerings, deceptions, quarrels, and recriminations that take place between the contracting parties would cause a person who had never seen such a matter transacted to stand aghast. Even at the last minute the parents of the bride often hold up a wedding until more money is extorted from the hapless groom. In one instance the bride sat weeping in her chair in the midst of a plowed field while the bridegroom's father rushed frantically about borrowing an extra hundred dollars to give to the bride's mother as a peace offering before the bridal journey to the husband's house could be resumed.

When the bride reaches the home of the

groom in her great red chair new difficulties await her. Without choice in regard to her husband, she is similarly without choice in regard to her mother-in-law, and both are, in the scheme of the bride's happiness, of equal importance. Chastity and a good reputation, so far as can be found out, are required of the bride but they are not a requisite for a husband. She is his and obedience to him and his mother is her first law. A little flicker of spirit will bring down on her head a whole avalanche of domestic troubles. Her early training when she was allowed to lie on her back and kick her heels into the floor in sheer anger have prepared her ill for this stage of her life, but it must be endured and the process is long and bitter.

From the time that she is old enough to understand, marriage is the objective point of her parents on her behalf, and now that she is actually married this new role has its objective. Until a son has been born to her she feels that her position as wife is very insecure. The tens of thousands of "Mother Goddesses" throughout China testify to this fear in the minds of the young brides. The very classics whose purity of diction and high standard of morals are the admiration of the world are directly responsible for woman's greatest degradation. There are seven chief sins enumerated in the classics and among the most heinous is barrenness.

Not to bring a son into the world to continue the ancestral worship is a direct affront to the husband and all the generations before him. It is proof conclusive that if she has not sinned in this life she has in some previous existence and she is out of favor with the spirits, good and bad. She may be repudiated for this cause, or as is most often the case, she is displaced by an-

other woman and the griefs and strifes that arise turn her very soul to gall, if by any chance she has learned to love her husband. Passing by book stalls in America there are sometimes seen such titles as: "He fell in love with his wife," or "She became acquainted with her husband." This might literally be the case and sometimes a real affection springs up, but in most cases a far less noble sentiment seals their relationship.

The sadness of the first wife's position is increased by the knowledge that often the secondary wives are the choice of the husband and she was not his personal choice. Furthermore, the husband often chooses the secondary wife from the only place possible for him to know personally persons of the opposite sex, and the silence and sullen contempt of the first wife has often burst out like the flames of a long smouldering fire when the secondary wife becomes the mother of a son. And the secondary wife is no less an object of pity, for it was not her choice that first of all made her an inmate of such a place, nor did she have the power to refuse to be purchased.

A jealousy and hatred almost incomprehensible springs up between these women who are bound to live together in the same establishment. There have been instances where a seeming love existed between the older and younger wives but on a closer intimacy it was found to be only assumed before the stranger and the invariable hatred was there. Nor does the birth of a son free the first wife from the fear of other wives being added, as a glance at the higher classes in China will prove. The Chinese are most proud of their family life and yet those who love China most and have served her longest feel that this is the rock on which she is splitting, and



CHINESE KITCHEN SHOWING METHOD OF PREPARING FOOD.

that the corruption and suspicion and hatreds and jealousies and intrigues and selfishness are all planted and fostered in the impure atmosphere of the polygamous home and burst out in shameful distinctness in the national life.

But sometimes when a son is born the young mother forgets her fears and she acquires new dignity in her husband's family. She can now look forward to the time when she too shall be a mother-in-law and manage her son's wife. Her object has again changed—first from marriage to motherhood and now to that blessed pinnacle of honor, to be a mother-in-law. How happy she will be sitting in the highest seat and sipping tea carried to her by an obedient daughter-in-law while little grandchildren tumble about her feet!

But should the little son sicken and die the blame is hers. Or should any other calamity befall the family the newest bride is responsible. The family make her feel her wickedness in no uncertain way. When her grief is too much for her to bear there is but one way out of the difficulty and that is suicide. This very month a bride in one of the great families of the city committed suicide on the night after her marriage, but more often the bereaved mother or the barren wife take their own lives. Even yesterday in a small hospital in the suburbs three such cases of attempted suicide were brought in.

But when old age is finally reached children and grandchildren care for the aged one with a solicitude that is often very beautiful. The best place is always hers and the choicest food is prepared for her and you are lost in admiration for the people that show such veneration for the aged. But your admiration receives a shock when you find that it is not for the aged, but

for the aged that belongs to that particular family. Another aged grandmother might sit on the steps and beg, while a choice meal was being served and it would not excite the least pity or the obligation to relieve the stranger's trouble.

And in the selfish old woman can be seen the fruitage of the untrained girl. All the best things are accepted as the only possible course. There is rarely a spirit of giving up the least thing for another.

That her selfish old soul may be sure of numerous descendants she has kept members of her family at home in idleness until their lives were ruined. She has often caused her daughter-in-law to "eat bitterness" worse than her own had been. The tender mercies of the heathen are very cruel when the opportunity comes to throw back onto another what has been suffered, even though the wrong once endured has no connection with the person about to suffer the fresh injury.

Perhaps the time when our Chinese sisters most need our help is in sickness. The diseases and discomforts that might be cured by a very little care are allowed to continue until the most loathsome maladies are seen even while riding through the streets.

But in her hour of great need when she goes down into the "Valley of the Shadow" often she does not return. A few minutes aid from a foreign physician would have saved her. When you have been ill recall the loving ministrations of friends, the spotlessness of your quiet room, think what these women endure when illness comes to them.

When fever is burning out the very life, fire-cracker demonstrations to scare the devil are

scarcely an adequate help. When the body is writhing in agony the chanting of priests and the beating of drums fail to comfort. When you can look up into the face of your Saviour and know that all things work together for good, think of your sisters who believe themselves the victims of malignant spirits. You know in whom you have believed, they fear they know not what.

If Christianity brought nothing else to the women of China but freedom from fear it would more than justify the effort. Every stage of her life is full of fear. Even babyhood is not an exception. The mother enforces her feeble commands with threats that the five devils will seize the child if she is disobedient. Sometimes the foreigner is substituted for their five majesties. Darkness is peopled with ghosts and goblins. A Christian graduate of a mission college sprang into the study of a missionary one evening, "Why this haste?" was asked. The reply was that the **mind** knew that fear of devils was foolish but that the **heart** still believed in them.

Fear of being sold is a terrible dread that hangs over many a girl. Only this week a little girl sobbed out her terrors to her foreign friend and the story was that her father was planning to sell her to whoever would give the best price.

Fear of being married, and the fear of being despised if not married; fear of bringing bad luck to the husband's family; fear of her husband's displeasure, but greater fear of the mother-in-law, fear of childlessness, fear of the husband's unfaithfulness; the ever present fear of idols and evil spirits, all hang like a cloud over the inner life of the woman. Then comes the last and supreme fear—that of death. The sting of death is sin and they have not heard of the Lamb that taketh away the sin of the world,

nor of the perfect Love that casteth out fear.

In the end, wherein lies the difference between China and the Christian home lands? Crimes and unkindness are found there also. True, but in a Christian land the sub-stratum is the Rock, Christ Jesus and however miry and depraved the debris heaped upon it, the Rock abides and we are confident. In non-Christian lands however fair and smiling the exterior we are certain that by probing we will find, not the Rock, but black and fathomless depths of selfishness and hatred.

If the best that a non-Christian nation can do for her women is so hopelessly inadequate, shall not we, as Christian women, bring to them the more abundant Life that these daughters of the King may be all glorious within?

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